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ANALYSIS

Christianity and Planned Economy*

THERE must be a quality in Christianity which the non-Christian, untutored in esoteric interpretations of the Gospel, cannot grasp. Or so it seems to me, when I measure the preachments of many of its current professors by what I have always considered the yardstick of Christianity—the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. But, then, I know nothing of Christianity except what I have learned from the Gospels. So it may be that the present exegesis will strike the trained theologian as an amateurish over-simplification.

I refer to the enthusiasm of a considerable segment of the ministry for the doctrine of human improvement by means of political formulae, more particularly those of the Socialistic genre. For from the pulpit come utterances that seem to identify the brotherhood of man with the police-State, the Kingdom of Heaven with the Leviathan of Hobbes.

On what testamentary evidence? For the life of me I cannot locate in Scripture any support for socialized medicine, make-work programs or the nationalization of industry. Neither the Charter of the United Nations nor the Communist Manifesto bear resemblance to anything taught by Jesus. And yet, His vicars—which the ministers claim to be—often plug for these things, and apparently in His name.

My understanding of His teachings leads me to believe that Jesus put full responsibility for personal behavior upon the individual. He suggested no way of shedding that responsibility. He did not say that man could shift his moral obligation to some governmental agency. Not one word do I find in the Gospels hinting that human souls can be merged into a super-colossal collectivized soul. According to this source-book, salvation cannot come to man via a politico-economic system, nor does it put down as moral behavior mere conformance to any system.

Jesus stressed the dignity of the individual and the glory of God. I take it that these two precepts are the premises of Christianity—if Christ is Christianity.

THERE is no State in His cosmos. He did say that He came to fulfill the law, not to break it. But from His attacks on established institutions it seems clear that the law referred to was not the "commandments of men." It was something higher than the edicts of a politburo. By what word, or act, does Christ identify His law with the wisdom of the politician or the say-so of the bureaucrat?

When Jesus walked and talked with men, the nearest thing to a bureaucracy was the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Rome concerned itself with the collection of tribute, and if this came regularly and in sufficient quantity, the people were suffered to carry on their social affairs in their accustomed way. The traditional theocracy served Rome as an instrument of "law and order," and managed affairs effectively through its influence as interpreter of tribal law and customs. Only when police power had to be invoked did Rome intervene. Up to that point, the dicta of the priesthood—as promulgated by the scribes and the Pharisees—had the force of bureaucratic directives.

Christ's opinion of these contemporary bureaucrats was too often and too clearly expressed to leave any doubt about it.

May we not assume that, as a general principle, He would put little weight on the doctrine of social or individual improvement through official guidance? Would He, in these days, endow with righteousness the Pharisees of Socialism? Or the scribes who would substitute economic planning for the exercise of free will?

There is something incongruous in the advocacy of modern Phariseism on the part of many ministers. It does not seem Christian. It is a sort of paganism, in that it deposes God in favor of the State, and substitutes for human dignity an idol called "social good."

How, in the name of common sense, can Jesus be enrolled on the side of a dole system, which, in the final analysis, is the necessary concomitant of a controlled economy? How can wardship under the State be associated with His name? True, He made much of charity, but He insisted that "thine alms be secret," and what is there secret about standing in line at the unemployment insurance office?

Charity is, and can only be, a personal matter—as to giver and receiver. It is not charity when the recipient lays claim to aid by law and an application blank, and the giver is a reluctant and impersonal "public." The State cannot be charitable for it has nothing to give, except that which it has taken from producers by compulsion. That is to say, the State gives taxes. And taxation is referred to in the Gospels as "tribute," while the tax-collector is designated as a person of low degree. Hence, the attempt to identify the public dole with the Christ-concept of charity is attenuated, if not actually blasphemous.

IN view of Christ's obvious antipathy toward "tribute," it seems to me that not only the dole, but every activity of the State is discredited by Christianity. The State lives by and for the collection of taxes; without taxes it would not be; without taxes it could not carry on the Socialist ventures which some professing Christians strangely advocate. If the institution of taxation is an evil, as Scripture indicates, then all that follows from this evil is also evil. The Socialistic ventures are made immoral by this original immorality.

"A good man out of the treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things," said Jesus. He did not say a good council, a good synagogue, a good planning board; nor did He mention a good tax. He specified a "good man." It is inconsistent with Christ's teachings to ascribe goodness to impersonal schemes, or to infuse a soul into a collectivity.

Frequent reference is made by ministerial enigmists of Statism to the parable of the coin: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

Significantly enough, the circumstances which elicited this remark are ignored by those who use it in support of the political establishment. Jesus was being heckled by enemies, whose obvious intent was to trick Him into making a statement that could be used against Him with the authorities. He had "perceived their wickedness." His enigmatic reply simply confused His confounders, as the Gospels relate, and it can be assumed that this was His purpose.

So the parable is without the philo-

sophic content frequently attributed to it. This was an on-the-spot remark, called forth by special circumstances, and cannot be classed with freely given lessons that obviously came from the heart, such as the Sermon on the Mount.

But, what did Jesus mean? What are the things due Caesar? Are they due as a matter of right or of might? Can one infer from this parable that tribute is included in God's scheme of things? Or, forsooth, did Jesus mean to put Caesar on a par with God? Taken by itself, the parable of the coin can be made to mean even that absurdity. Taken with Christ's teachings as a whole it lacks significance. Seeing how He stressed man's duty to God, the parable might well be rephrased: the more of yourself you render unto Caesar, the less you have for God.

CHRIST'S time was not free from politics. The entrenched ecclesiasts, naturally enough, were strong for the Roman *status quo*. On the other hand, there were those who advocated revolution. These "zealots" asserted that not until the Roman yoke was thrown off, and the Jewish kingdom restored, would the grace of Yahweh come upon the people again. There is not a shred of evidence that Jesus concerned himself with the zealots, or that Roman rule interested Him in the least. As for the ecclesiasts, Christ held them in scorn only because of their perversion of principle.

The zealots, of course, received short shrift from the Romans when caught. It was therefore to the interest of the high priests, who were annoyed by the popularity of Jesus, and fearful for their prestige if not their prerogatives, to pin the label on Him. The incident of the parable of the coin must be related to this fact; so, too, the derogatory title of "King of the Jews." Jesus, by His exemplary behavior and His disconcerting statements, made it difficult to lay the heresy charge against Him. Besides, Pontius Pilate cared not a fig for the religious quarrels of this pestiferous sect. The only way to get rid of Jesus was to involve Him with the revolutionary agitators.

When the high priests brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate for sentence they had a hard time making this accusation stick. The Roman seems to have been well satisfied that whatever the shortcomings of the defendant, at least He was not a political agitator. Among the modern vicars of Christ are some who are not so sure about that.

Nevertheless, there is nothing in the story of Jesus that in the slightest suggests an affinity with Henry Wallace, Josef Stalin, Clement Attlee or Franklin Roosevelt. Christ had no high opinion of men who accumulate material wealth. But he did not propose to improve the lot of some by depriving others of their property. He did not promise salvation to a five-year plan, social security or compulsory military training. Man-made law was not His panacea. He had no truck with self-beatified bureaucracy.

It seems to me—a non-Christian who has always taken for granted that Christ is Christianity—that Jesus proclaimed the dignity of the individual and the glory of God, and nothing else. And that, I submit, is not consonant with the doctrine of the supremacy of the State.

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